# LESS IS MORE

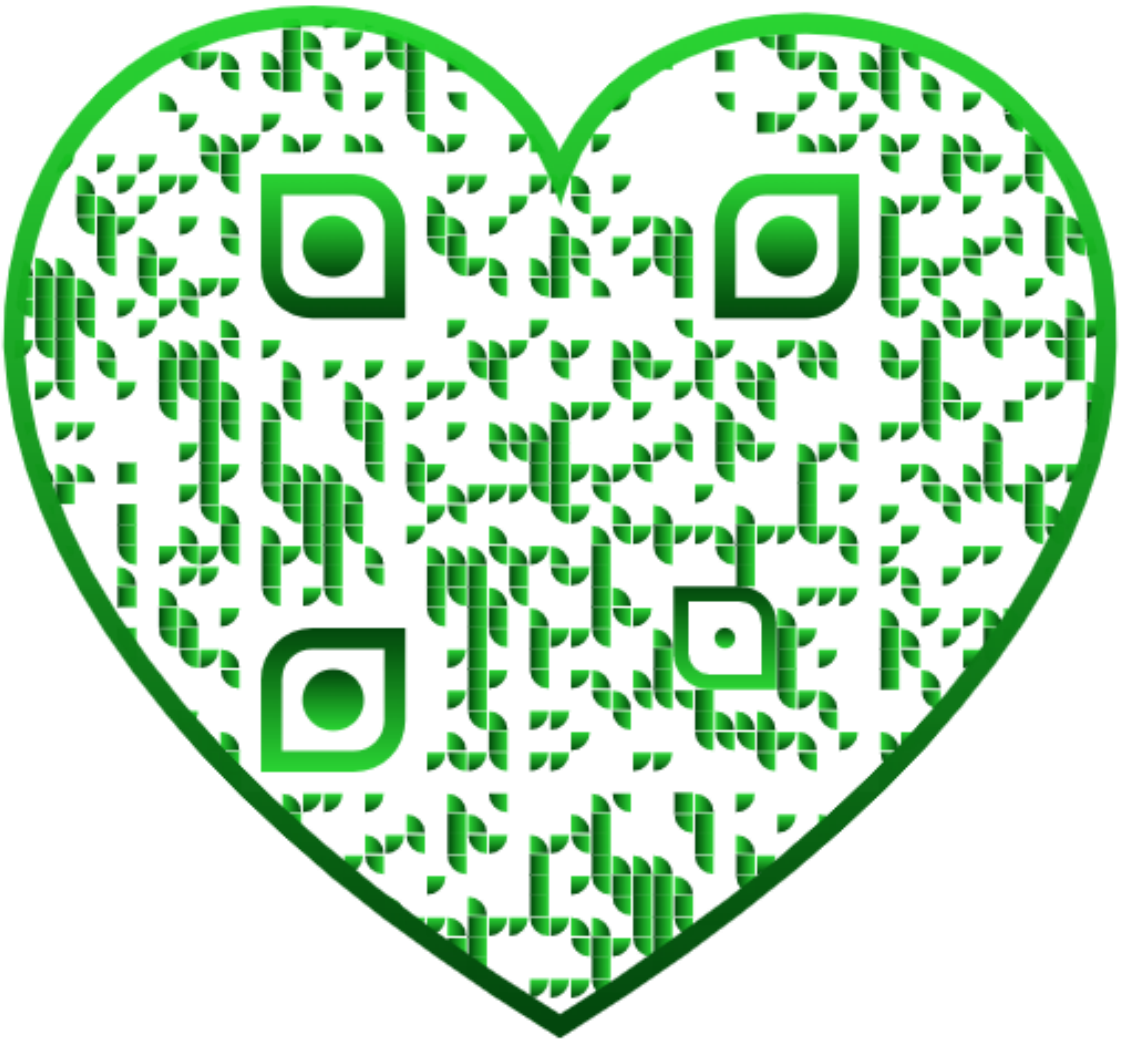
"In the long run, it's more important to look at paintings than listen to the way someone plays bebop lines."

**—Jim Hall**

BY ADAM LEVY

At first hearing, most listeners concentrate on Jim Hall's improvised lines. His lyrical phrases—and the spaces he leaves between them—are something special. Hall's understated *comping* is less immediately obvious, but when you listen closely, his chordal work is at least as focused and musical as his single-note playing. Hall comps sparsely enough to avoid distracting soloists, yet he'll spur them on by subtly spicing up a tune's harmony and rhythm. ■ "Comping is really about listening," says Hall. "So is improvising, of course, but then you're listening to *yourself*—hearing the phrase you've just played and reacting to it to create a melodic narrative. When comping, your job is to

## A Comping Master Class with Jim Hall



listen to the soloist and react."

## Small Is Beautiful

With that in mind, Hall relies on two- and three-note voicings for accompaniment. "They keep the music clear and uncluttered," he explains. "Big, full-voiced chords are hard to move gracefully, and they tend to get in the soloist's way. With smaller shapes, you can easily alter one or two of the notes in your chord to better compliment what the soloist is playing."

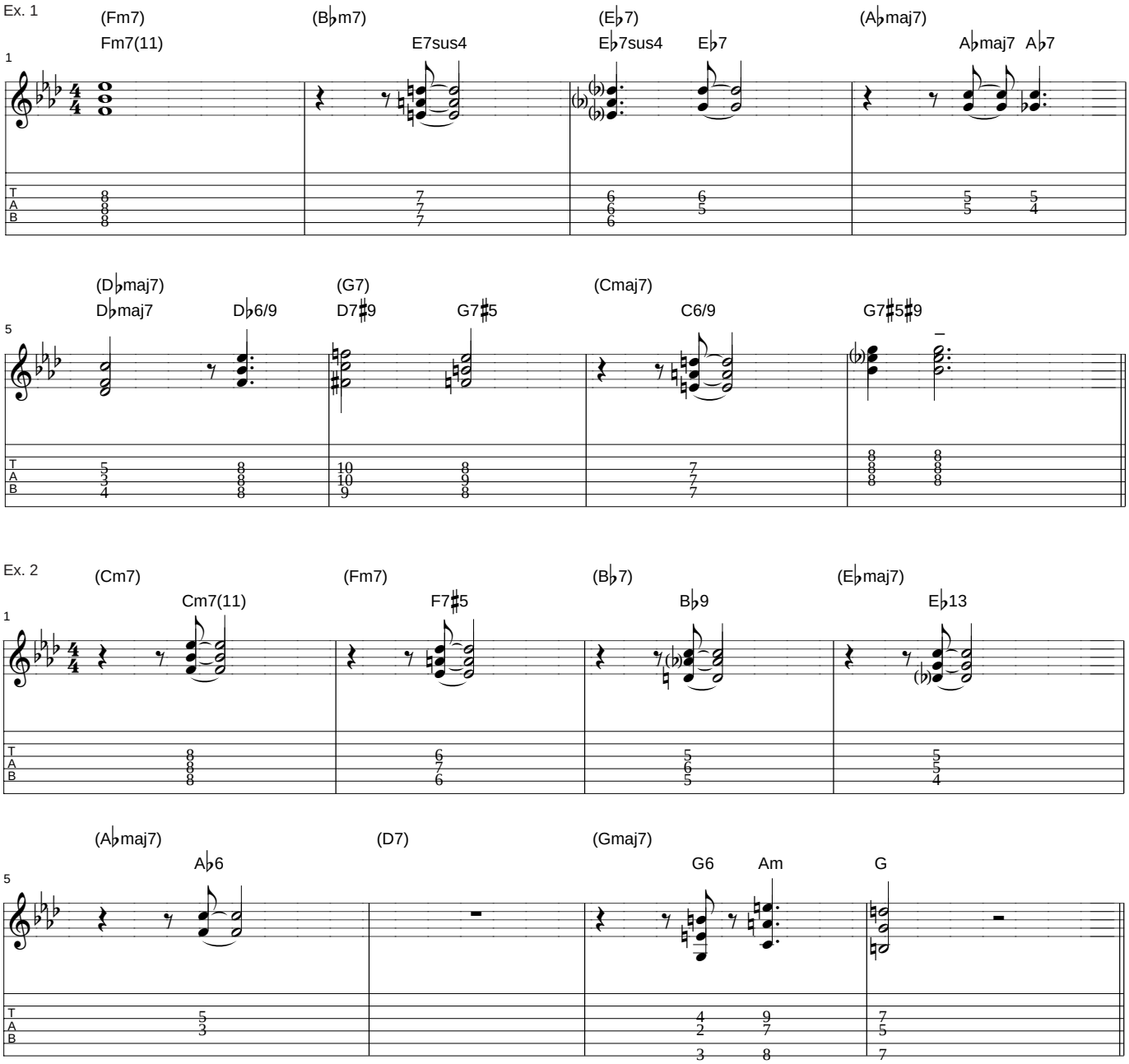
To illustrate his point, Hall plays **Ex. 1**—the harmony for the first eight measures of "All the Things You Are." As you can see, he regularly omits chord roots. Many of his voicings consist only of the chord's 3 and 7. The *G* and *C* at the beginning of measure 4, for instance, form an abbreviated *A♭maj7*. Compare Hall's chord choices to the original chords above them.

## Quartal Magic

This example shows how quartal harmony (chords built in fourths) figures prominently in Hall's palette. Quartal chords are cool not only because they sound hip, but because they are harmonic chameleons. For example, the three-note quartal voicing in measure 1 could stand in for many different chords: *Fm7(11), B♭m7(11), A♭6/9, A♭13, D♭6/9, D♭13,* and *G7♯9♯5*. The quartal *E7sus4* in the second measure is an odd substitute for the song's original harmony (*B♭m7*), but voice-leads perfectly to Hall's *E♭7sus4* chord in measure 3.

**Ex. 2** shows how Hall comps through in the next eight bars of "All the Things You Are." Again, artful voice-leading makes his harmonic substitutions sound as natural as the song's original changes. Notice the open-voiced triads in the last two measures. These wide, simple sounds are a clear departure from the compact extended and altered voicings Hall played to this point.

## Bass-Chord Dialog

One reason Examples 1 and 2 sound uncluttered is that Hall leaves out virtually all the bass notes. However, he regularly employs another

type of comping that *does* include sparsely placed bass notes. **Ex. 3** shows how Hall applies this technique to a blues in *G*. Notice how the bass and chords play off each other, creating a musical dialog. "I think of bass notes and chords as the left- and right-hand parts a pianist might play," says Hall.

He attacks the bass notes (in this example, the notes below the staff and the lowest voice in each four-note chord) with his pick, grabbing the rest with a hybrid pick-and-fingers grip.

## Green Rhythms

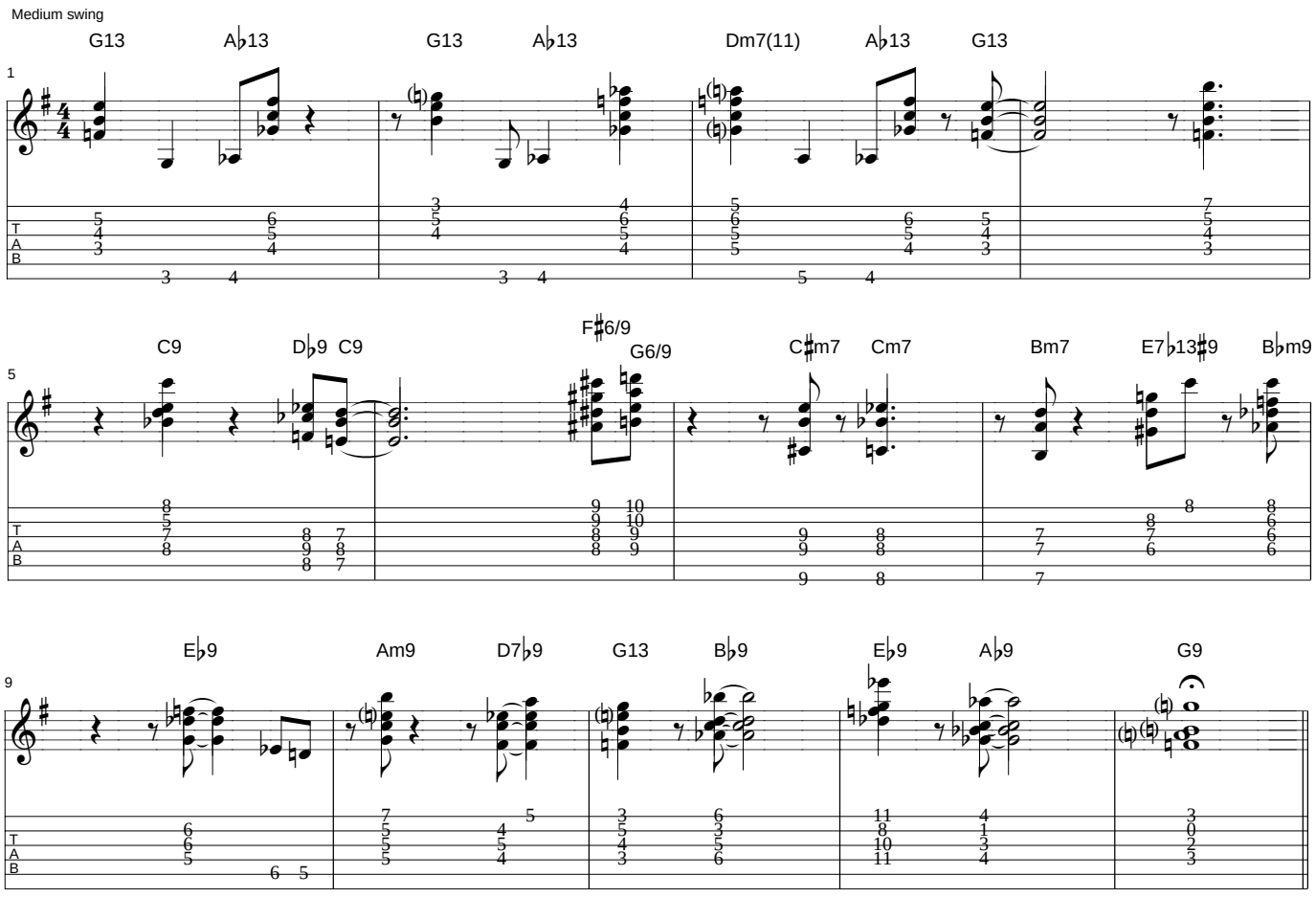
"Of course, you can always just play straight 4/4 rhythm," says Hall playing **Ex. 4**. "I think of this as a drummer playing time on the hi-hat. I keep my right hand moving up and down in

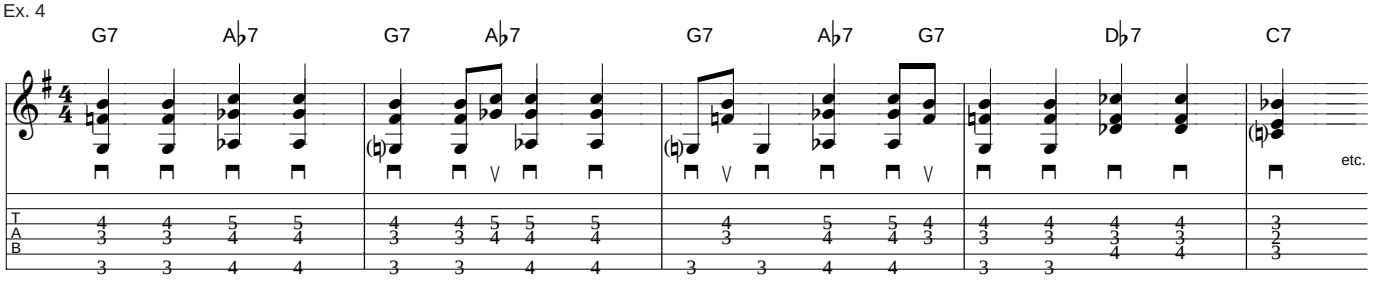
## OPEN LETTER FROM A FAN

*John Scofield has played with Hall on many occasions, and recorded a duet with him on Hall's '91 release,* Live at Town Hall, Vol. 2. *Last summer, Scofield again played a duo concert with Hall. Based on first-hand experience, Scofield contends that Hall is the King of Comp.* —AL

"Actually, it's hard to say anything about Jim's comping without getting into his whole conception," says Scofield. "His musicality is the key: Jim understands music very, very thoroughly, so when he accompanies you—especially in a duo situation—he hears *everything* you're doing and reacts to it with a deep-swinging groove. It makes you want to really play.

"One of the things I admire about Jim's comping is his sound. It's one thing to hear him on a record, but when you're playing with him, you appreciate what a beautiful sound he gets out of the instrument. Then there's his harmonic awareness—his voicings and voice-leading are perfect. Every time I play with him, it's like a guitar lesson."

Ex. 3

Ex. 4



eighth-notes, and just play accents where they're needed. Sometimes I'm hardly hitting the strings at all." Jazzers often call this "comping Freddie Green style" in homage to the great rhythm guitarist in Count Basie's big band.

## Harmonized Bass Lines

Another technique is what Hall calls a "harmonized bass line." The idea is this: Walk a quarter-note bass line on the sixth string and drag simple chord voicings (usually just the 3 and 7) along the third and fourth strings to shadow the bass line.

This type of comping is particularly effective if you're playing without a bassist. When making up your own harmonized bass lines, be sure to treat the *line* as the most important element. This isn't about hip chord voicings; it's about making a strong bass line and creating momentum with a steady rhythm.

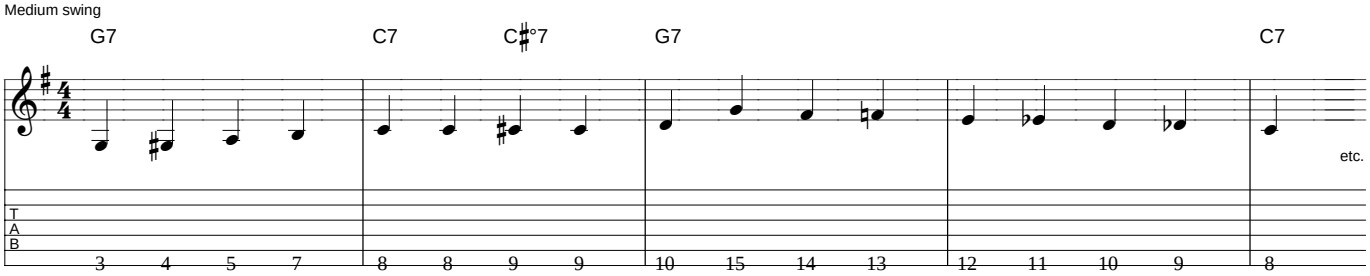
**Ex. 5a** shows a walking bass line for the first four bars of a blues in *G*. **Ex. 5b** shows Hall's harmonization, and **Ex. 5c** shows a variation.

## Work It Out

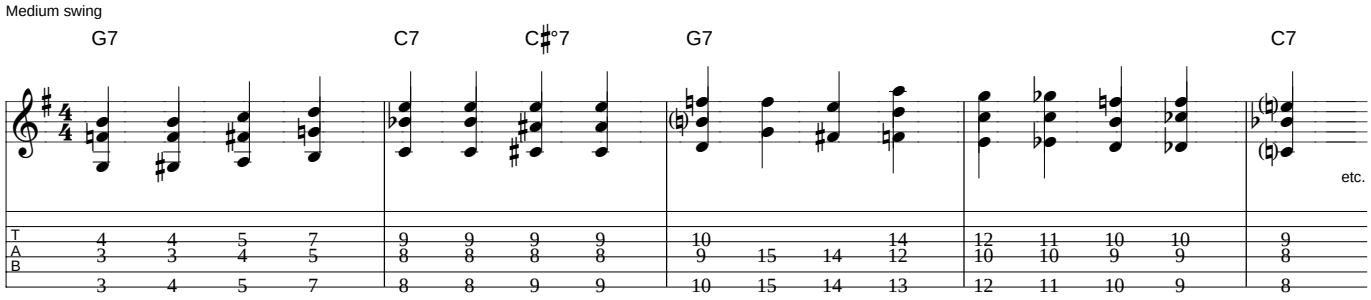
Practice these comping techniques until you can make them swing with any kind of chord progression at any tempo. Apply them to your favorite standards. "For practice, record yourself playing a melody, and then comp along with the tape," Hall suggests, though he adds that this is no substitute for playing with living, breathing musicians.

Hall finishes our comping lesson with a bit of Zen guitar philosophy: "One of the most important lessons I've learned is you don't have to play all the time. When you're not sure what to play, lay out. In other words, don't just do something—sit there."

Ex. 5a




Ex. 5b




Ex. 5c